

CIA choice accused on Iran testimony

Evasion of responsibility seen

WASHINGTON [AP]—A member of the Senate Intelligence Committee Wednesday accused Robert M. Gates, President Reagan's choice to head the CIA, of trying to evade responsibility for misleading testimony presented to the panel last year by William Casey, former agency director.

Sen. Arlen Specter [R., Pa.] said Casey's testimony last Nov. 21 about the sale of arms to Iran and diversion of the profits to Nicaraguan rebels had been "skimpy, scanty, uninformative and really misleading," and noted that Gates had directed preparation of the statement.

Gates, now acting director of the agency, said that although he directed subordinates to supply "all the facts" in preparing Casey's testimony and he read two or three preliminary drafts of it, he would have to check with those who prepared the testimony to find out why Casey was not more forthcoming.

"When you say you have to talk to those who drafted the testimony, again you try to distance yourself from that testimony," Specter replied angrily. "That's a shading which I find to have an element of dissembling. You took the strategic lead in preparing that testimony, you reviewed two or three drafts."

Gates defended his action, saying that Casey's testimony "was a fair statement of what we knew at the time. We thought it was important to get the facts out."

Gates added that the agency was having difficulty at the time—just four days before the diversion of money from the Iran arms sale to Nicaragua's rebels became public—gathering the facts about its own involvement.

Specter asked Gates if he were a member of the committee would he today vote to confirm Casey as director of the CIA in view of what is now known about Casey's Nov. 21 testimony.

"Yes, I would," Gates said.

Gates also said it is now clear that the Iran arms operation was a covert activity taken away

from the agency with proper jurisdiction—the CIA—and "that was a serious mistake."

Gates sought to quiet concerns he raised on Tuesday during his first day of hearings when he said the Iran deal was primarily a diplomatic initiative carried out by the National Security Council.

"The NSC operation clearly was not a diplomatic initiative," he said Wednesday. "It was much broader than that." He added, "I think a lot of different institutions have learned a lot of lessons out of this entire affair."

Gates said the CIA is pursuing a "fairly extensive internal investigation" into whether the agency violated Congress' ban on military aid to the Nicaraguan rebels.

Gates also repeated statements that the early evidence he had of a diversion of arms-sales profits to the contras was slim and he immediately notified Vice Admiral John Poindexter, then head of the National Security Council of his concerns.

"So you basically passed the buck to Poindexter?" asked Sen. Bill Bradley [D., N.J.], a Senate Intelligence Committee member.

"Now you can call that passing the buck," Gates retorted. "I call it trying to get it into the hands of those who are better prepared to evaluate the information that we had gotten."

Gates said Tuesday agency officials from top to bottom had been instructed to stay far clear of anything dealing with contra aid.

"It was out of caution to avoid crossing the bounds of the permissible that CIA officers at all levels were urged to avoid involvement with matters concerning private efforts to support the contras," Gates said.

The committee chairman, Sen. David Boren [D., Okla.], said the vote on whether to confirm the 43-year-old career intelligence analyst would be delayed at least until early March, in part to see whether Reagan's commission investigating the Iran-contra scandal turns up additional information on the CIA's conduct.